The Siege of the Ivory Tower

Address by

Douglass Burns Clarke

Vice-Principal and Registrar, Sir George Williams University

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President Baruch, Honoured Guests, Fellow Rotarians, Ladies and Gentlemen:

MAY I thank the Vocational Service Committee for giving me the opportunity to say a few words about your universities and the problems that beset them. I hope that this is a topic that will engage your deep interest and concern, for it is axiomatic today that "education is everybody's business," that "everyone who lives in a civilized society has a stake in education" whether he has children of his own or not, that "our young people are our common stake in the future", "knowledge is our common inheritance and wealth". As I have said, these things are axiomatic, and their acceptance is certified by the space given to education, in recent years, in the press. Growing governmental concern about education is evidence of growing public concern.

There are certain myths that persist about various professions: the plumber forgets his tools, the banker has easy hours, the academic man lives in an ivory-tower. Of plumbers and bankers, I have nothing to say; they can make their own defences. Of the academic ivory-tower, there is this, — it is half-true (but in a way neither popularly meant nor understood), and half-false.

The popular concept of the professor in an ivory-tower is one of a dreamer preoccupied with unreality, insulated and isolated from the practical world, and unaware of the facts of life. Now, there are many different concepts as to the nature of a university, even among university men, but none of them has any room for an ivory-tower such as this. And while there is an essential place for a wise detachment and contemplation, this contemplation is concerned with the deepest aspect of reality and the ivory-tower has more of the nature of a watch-tower or observatory than a shelter.

To understand the essential role of *this* "ivory-tower," it is necessary to understand something of the nature of a university.

A university is many things. In each institution there will be different emphases and stresses, so that it is hard to get a general image that will be agreed upon by university men themselves. And yet there is a curious sameness to the different images. One institution regards itself as dedicated to research, another to teaching, but there is a kinship and a family resemblance between them, and they recognize it. They recognize it from institution to institution even where there is a difference between the ends of the search, or the nature of what is to be taught.

First of all, to use a phrase much beloved by schoolmen, "A university is a community of scholars." Many of us would stop there and say that "a university is a community of scholars — period," ignoring all the other things that a university is, including some things that it never intends to be, such as a four-year finishing school, an urban country-club, a complex of activities social, athletic, as well as intellectual, for young people, a congerie of trade-schools training apprentices for various professions: medicine. theology, pharmacy, dentistry, law, engineering, commerce, nursing, physical education, physio–and occupational therapy, social work, music, art, etc., etc., and etc.

These other elements have always surrounded the "community of scholars." Young people have always gathered about it in the search for wisdom and knowledge, and have always built around their own sub-community, a complex of activities which has its own values, and frequently attracts other young people to the university for the sake of these activities, young people who are not at all interested in the scholars, but nevertheless become exposed to them, sometimes to their benefit, for young people have a curious aptitude to catch fire and the mind is a combustible element.

The professional schools, too, have clustered around the "community of scholars" for they, too, have their own scholars who seek their kind. It would be possible to divorce the "trade-schools" from the universities, but to the loss of each. The "community of scholars" enriches its speculation with the facts that are supplied it by the work and research of the "trade-schools", the latter enrich their practical work by contact with the speculative inquiries of the schoolmen.

At the heart of it all, then, as the common element in the richly varied lives of universities, exists this "community of scholars," and it is this central community that inhabits and must inhabit the so-called ivory-tower. What then is the true nature of this special position?

First of all, it is one which is concerned with the real world outside because it is one which engages itself with what is real, observes and evaluates the processes of life and being, sends its young students out to deal with them, accepts problems submitted from outside for study. But it is one which, in order to fulfil the deep responsibilities of its own calling, must preserve a certain detachment, a certain refusal of allegiance and commitment to any but its own basic function.

The teacher must have recourse to his ivory-tower to concentrate upon his first and primary obligation: to guide the developing mind and personality of his student. This he must regard as an end in itself. The demands of that individual mind and personality upon his regard are uppermost, and he must consider them sacred. It is always the student's individual nature that comes first, not the demand of society for people trained to respect its current sacred cows, the needs of the state for acquiescent followers of contemporary political ideologies, not the needs of business, industry, and the various professions for trained personnel. These, too, have their claims, and the student must be prepared to engage himself with all of them when he goes forth from the university, but never at the expense of his free adventure in the world of ideas, or of the suppression of his unique personality.

The teacher can fail in two ways. He can fail by refusing to recognize the relevance of what lies outside his ivory-tower and omitting to prepare his student to commit himself adequately to the challenges of society, the state, and the world of practical affairs,—as he can fail in his own personal life by confusing objectivity about these matters with neutrality towards them. But he can be a worse failure if he simply endoctrinates his student and converts him into a stereotype, a frightened conformist, a slavish follower of the acceptable, the respectable, the opportune. What he must strive for is to develop in his student his own peculiar possibilities, and send him forth to deal with the issues of his time and to ply his trade guided by the resources of a disciplined and speculative mind, a set of values that transcends personal advantage, the courage to hold to unpopular convictions when he is sure he is in the right, and the wisdom to recognize what is real. Only thus can he send forth students who can make the best of all contributions to society, the state, and the professions.

The scholar must have recourse to his ivory-tower to concentrate upon his first and primary obligation: to explore and evaluate the true and real nature of being. This he must regard as an end in itself. He is concerned simply to know the true nature of things, to set a true value upon them, and to understand as deeply as possible the nature of being and man's involvement and experience with it. He is not immediately concerned with the practical application of this knowledge except in so far as its practical application reveals its essence as truth or clarifies its value. What he discerns as true satisfies him in the mere discernment and he is unconcerned about its saleability, its acceptability, or its respectability. He has allegiance only to truth and this is the one allegiance his ivory-tower must leave him free to respect at all costs. His function is to enlarge the mind of man through his increasing discrimination and comprehension of value and truth. He fails as a scholar the moment he perverts truth to create a sensation and attract attention, the moment he compromises truth to gain popularity or acceptance, the moment he suppresses truth to avoid trouble, the moment he distorts truth to make it conform to preconceived ideas, his own or other, the moment he restricts its dimensions to what is immediately useful.

The inhabitants of the tower, then, take advantage of its semi-privacy to concentrate in freedom upon their trusts. They are concerned about the world outside, move freely in it, and belong to it; they are sensitive and respondent to the claims of that world in so far as they do not interfere with

their trusts, but their first loyalty is to these. Without this commerce with the outer world, their labour would lack substance; without the special privilege of the tower, their labour would lack lasting value. This is in essence the true nature and importance of the academic ivory-tower, the watch-tower of the mind.

There has always been, however, a danger to the continued existence of the ivory-tower by very reason of its essential dynamic inter-relations with this outside world. The ebb and flow of the current between it and the outer world has always threatened and perhaps will always threaten its foundations. But today their are three challenges in particular which inhabitants of the tower and of the outer world must carefully regard if the tower is to be preserved. These are: the immense growth in student population; the greater demands of commerce and industry, in a technical age, for resources and aid from the universities; the critical dependence of the universities upon the state for basic financial support. These all present new challenges to universities, challenges which dynamic institutions must meet in order to stay alive. Universities, like all other living institutions, must grow and change to meet a new order of being, or they will die. They have many problems to face in their battle for survival and development, but the essential problem is how to change to meet the real needs of the age and at the same time preserve an essential unchanging core.

The public has been fully informed through the press of the impending tidal wave of students. However, this has created a false picture of the problem that universities have had to solve in this respect; the accepted picture is of a problem that universities must gird themselves to meet in the future. The truth is, that universities have had to grow now, for some decades, to meet a rapidly increasing population of students, and that they have proceeded from crisis to crisis in this respect for some time. Consider these statistics.

In 1935-39, on the eve of World War II, the total student population in independent degree granting institutions in Canada was 36,729. In 1945-46, at the close of the war, it rose to 63,500, almost double, due to the heavy registration of veterans. A short fifteen years later, in 1960-61, it had almost doubled again to 114,000. The most conservative estimates for 1970-71, ten years later are almost *triple* the 1960-61 figure, and it is forecast that we will have 312,000 students that year.

This gives the embattled universities, struggling desperately to catch up with current needs, ten years to reorganize institutionally to handle larger numbers, to plan, finance, and build the new plants needed to house these activities, and to find a staff of scholars to teach there; ten years for new institutions to be founded and developed to help to carry a share of the load.

The answer to one aspect of this challenge looks superficially simple. Find more space for more students. Universities are expanding in size to try to meet their obligation in this respect, but there is a limit to the optimum rate of expansion in size. It is imperative that part of the load be taken by the establishment of new universities, and they are not increasing at the same rate as student population. If we speak solely of "institutions offering instruction and granting degrees in one or more fields other than theology" we have the following picture: in 1938-39, there were 27 such institutions; in 1945-46, 30, and in 1960-61, 40. One view of the situation at least is that the needs for the future can best be met if a number of smaller universities and colleges can be developed to complement the work being done at the larger established institutions. Similarly, recognizing the fact that many students move on to university, who could be better served at other kinds of institutions, particularly in technical schools, it is to be hoped that there will be a quick development of such institutions at the post-high school level to offer more realistic training to such students. If the Quebec Royal Commission on Education has the vision and the power to act quickly and wisely, there is no reason why new institutions of both kinds cannot be developed in Quebec in a carefully planned manner, and this next crisis be met adequately.

Regardless of such possibilities, the flood of students is bringing and will bring to the universities other serious problems which must be solved. With expanding enrollment, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the old ratios between professors and students, and new methods of instruction will have to be employed (and I refer, for example, to experiments with the use of television as an instructional medium). It is imperative here that whatever new methods are employed do not merely satisfy by purveying facts and processes. The old relationship between teacher and student was a personal one whose real value, perhaps, was one of stimulation, challenge, guidance, and direction in the disciplining of the mind. A good teacher was never satisfied with training a student merely to know; he required him to think. He considered him truly learned "not who knew most, but who knew best." Somehow the relationship, and function of teaching, must be preserved, and it is just this which is most drastically threatened by greater numbers. It would be tragic if universities started to turn out masses of people stuffed with masses of facts, but ill-prepared to sort them, assess them, and to think creatively around them. This would simply produce that horrible paradox — a learned ignorance.

No thinking educator, and I trust all educators are thinking men, at least they are supposed to be such, no thinking educator will deplore the fact that so many people are seeking further education. They welcome it. But while they are dedicated to the task of advancing education as widely as possible, they are also dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the maintenance of the highest standards consonant with the highest in human potentials. They must do both. They cannot surrender and settle for one. But one does threaten the other; mass production raises the risk of lowered standards, and the big problem of the educator and the university today is to meet the challenge of numbers without jeopardizing excellence.

But the numbers who come knocking at its doors are not the only force that presently besieges the ivory-towers. The community, of which the university is a part, comes knocking at its doors with increasing frequency as the complexity of our age increases, and the university is asked to

deploy its resources, its knowledge of society, of human dynamics, of applied science, of medicine, of managerial technics, to the solution of pressing problems of civic government, social stress, industrial development, physical strain, the employment of idle hours and so on and so on, and to apply its scholarship to new fields never before envisaged. It is asked to provide solutions to such problems and to train people to work outside its walls as specialists in constantly sub-dividing fields. Some selections from recent university catalogues will illustrate this latter point; Courses are now offered at the university level in such matters as: Transportation and Traffic; Internal Auditing; Hotel English; Food Packaging and Marketing; Television News; Clinical Methods in Speech Correction; Methods in Minor Sports; Psychology of Staff Relations and Supervision; Driver Education; and Household Equipment. To the traditional schoolman, such courses seem weird and wonderful. But it must be remembered that from the beginning the universities trained for the uses of the world its required specialists, its doctors, its lawyers, and its churchmen, yes — and later its engineers, its therapists, its social workers. Where society needs special workers trained in depth it turns to the university, and the university traditionally turns to the task of sound training.

The danger is not that universities are thus becoming more complex, but that the requests are coming so frequently, and that the funds which industry and society provides are so often earmarked for these specialties, specialties which however important are only secondary to the university's main function, that the basic areas of university work are in danger of being depleted of essential staff and starved for financial resources. It could happen, if constant efforts are not made to counter it, that universities could be converted to trade schools, and scholarships decline to an obsessive preocupation of a disregarded few with inconsequential matters removed from the main current of life.

A university cannot remain static — it must take account of new knowledge and use new techniques; it must meet a broadening social need; — but with all this it must maintain its freedom and the integrity to serve its basic function. To become merely a means of satisfying the purely contemporary, immediate, or practical needs of a people, a society, a state, a civilization —is to lose its real essence, and in the long term to cease to serve life as it should. Only its ultimate, free, and unrestricted service of truth can save it, — only men raised in this tradition and disseminating this attitude through society can maintain a society that is free to serve nobler and higher ends than its immediate and selfish needs. Even the most specialized trainee who goes out from a university should carry with his special skills, these essential traits of the university man, if he is truly to gain and to give from his life there all that a university should be expected to give him.

The day has long passed since a university could operate on its own resources or upon the endowments granted it by wealthy and far-sighted patrons. It now has to turn to industry and above all to government. And this creates an uneasy alliance, for while no serious encroachment or threat of encroachment has yet been made upon the independence of thought and teaching that is the most serious essential for the very life of a university, we recall the adage that "he who pays the piper calls the tune," and we ask ourselves what tune we could be called to play who know only the anthem of truth?

There is, of course, no deep-seated plot "to take over the universities;" but how far can we go in saying that no responsible statesman wishes to restrict academic freedom, control the lines of education, direct the thinking of young people? It has happened; it can happen again — let there be no mistake about that. "Seldom in history have men held power in their hands and not used it". And the concentrating reliance of universities upon the financial support of the state could gradually result in the loss of the independence of the university, and the placing of the power to control these essential institutions directly in the hands of government.

It is not enough to hope that statesmen will always be far-sighted enough, as they are now, to see that the destruction of the integrity of the universities and the abrogation of academic freedom is the first step towards the destruction of the integrity of the state and the denial of freedom of thought of the citizen. And every attack upon an outspoken teacher by the state or the community, every act of censorship over the curriculum, every bit of special earmarking of funds for special projects that diverts needed support from the institution as a whole, becomes such an attack and a denial.

Positive steps must be taken to ensure the preservation of the integrity and the freedom of the university and the scholar in their search for, their examination and their evaluation of truth and knowledge. Let the community as well as the state itself directly support its institutions so that the university never solely relies upon one area of financial support for its existence. And let state support be statutory and beyond the whims and dictates of single politicians or parties. (We applaud the several moves of the present Government in this direction.) Unless your universities have such guarantees their reliance upon self-government must be short-lived.

The universities have many problems, thank God, for problems mean challenge, and challenge means growth and life. But these are the most dangerous problems that beset it: the assault of numbers, the starvation of pure scholarship by the community, and the fear of a stronger ally who might take over.

In the meantime they grow, they provide a multiplicity of new services and for new types of scholars, they participate with the state in developing our total educational forces, and above all they continue to produce for life and the community, their most important product, the scholar, described thus once by Emerson:

"He is one who raises himself from private considerations and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. — Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours, has uttered as its commentary on the world of action, — these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of today, — this he shall hear and promulgate."